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All the Comforts of the House (of Representatives)

BY CAROL FELSENTHAL

A recent *Wall Street Journal* story reported that Andy Goss, a former Army interrogator seeking the GOP nomination for a Congressional seat from Arizona, is proposing to cut congressional pay by 40 percent (salary is currently \$174,000) and use the dollars saved to build a barracks on Capitol Hill. All 435 representatives and 100 senators would be required to live there.

Four of the 19 members of the Illinois delegation go Goss one better: they sleep in their offices. All four are Chicago Democrats: Dan Lipinski (3rd District), Mike Quigley (5th), Luis Gutierrez (4th), and Bobby Rush (1st)—although Rush sometimes checks into a hotel.

The *Journal* article was part of a recent small media flurry about House members bedding down in their offices. Slow news time? In any case, the logistics of the matter are worth exploring.

A Quigley aide says he does it to save money. “He has two daughters in college,” he says. Dan Lipinski, who rented a place during his first year in Congress, told me in a telephone interview, “I got tired of paying rent.”

The House is normally in session from Tuesday to Thursday and often adjourns around 5 p.m. on Thursday, so there’s time to get to the airport and home. Lipinski says that leaves only two nights to contend with the racket from cleaning crews “scrubbing down hallways.” Quigley has progressed, his aide told me, from sleeping on the office sofa to an air mattress, to a thin mattress that he stows in the office hallway next to his bike. Fred W. Beuttler, Deputy Historian of the House (and formerly a historian at the University of Illinois-Chicago) estimates that 40 reps sleep in their offices. He said he didn’t know of any female members who sleep on-site—nor any senator who does so, attributing the latter to the fact that senators are often in session Monday through Friday. (The House rarely works a five-day week.)

The office squatters shower in the House gym, entrance to which is strictly limited to members and former members. All three House office buildings—Cannon, Rayburn, and Longworth—are connected by tunnels, so members need not go outside to reach the gym, which is located in the basement of Rayburn. (All three buildings have basement men’s rooms with showers, but the members-only gym is much nicer, Lipinski says.)

Should the wife or significant other of one of the 40 visit Washington and care to share her Congressman's air mattress or sofa—neither Quigley's nor Lipinski's wife has ever cared to—no problem, says Beuttler, emphasizing that when it comes to their offices, the members make the rules. If a congressman wants to smoke in his office or anywhere in his suite, he is free to do so. If he wants to bring his dog to his office, that's his prerogative, too. In fact, interns are often seen walking members' dogs, Beuttler says. The office sleepers even have their own informal caucus, called the In-Office Caucus. While it bears no resemblance to a policy caucus, it is bipartisan—the head is first-term Utah Republican Jason Chaffetz. (On his website, Chaffetz features “cot-side chats,” talking to the camera while seated at the foot of his green-striped cot.)

Lipinski says he has heard of the in-office caucus but is not a member. He laughs when asked if he, Quigley, and Chaffetz—all just floors apart in Longworth—ever get together for pajama parties: eating snacks, watching sports, etc. No, he says, but adds that he occasionally goes to dinner with Quigley.

As for meals, while Lipinski will warm up food in the office microwave, Quigley, according to his aide, is more likely to eat out, grab some Chinese takeout, or attend a reception where he can enjoy free hors d'oeuvres.

Quigley and Lipinski seem to have their accommodations figured out—who needs government-funded barracks?